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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BRUSSELS 000041

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TAGS: [CASC](#) [IR](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [PROP](#) [PTER](#) [BE](#)  
SUBJECT: BELGIUM: GOB STRATEGY TO SECURE RELEASE OF THREE  
BELGIAN CITIZENS FROM IRAN

REF: A. STATE 129480  
[1](#)B. BRUSSELS 00017

Classified By: Acting Pol/Econ Counselor Robert Kiene for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: After the safe return of three Belgian citizens held in Iran, poloffs met with Pierre Gillon, Iran desk officer in the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to discuss the Belgian approach to obtaining their release and to urge Belgium's assistance in securing the release of Americans held in Iran (ref A). Gillon said avoiding politicization of the matter, treating it as a consular issue and keeping bilateral discussion quiet helped the GOB to succeed. All significant negotiations took place in Teheran not Brussels and the Belgian Ambassador in Teheran spoke only to two Iranian officials in order to avoid confusion and an opportunity to the Iranians to shift responsibility. A prominent local lawyer was key to understanding the charges (such as they were) brought against the Belgians and getting the charges dropped. Even after all this, Gillon said that the process took several weeks and was opaque. Gillon believes that the U.S. interest section of the Swiss Embassy should have all the pertinent information from their Belgian counterparts in Teheran. END SUMMARY

[1](#)2. (C) On January 5, Pierre Gillon, desk officer for Iran and Iraq at the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) was unable to talk about the pending release of Belgian citizens from Iran when poloff first delivered ref A demarche seeking assistance with captured Americans, because the Belgians were not safely back home at that time. Gillon said that he might be able to share more information once they were in Belgium.

[1](#)3. (SBU) The three travelers arrived back in Brussels later on January 5. Two of them were traveling together when they went to Iran as tourists, but they had only brief contact with the third before they all were arrested. One of the two Belgians traveling together was apparently arrested for taking photos of a military base. The third was arrested after some reference to him was found in the others' personal effects. The families of the travelers realized that something was wrong when Internet blogs they had been keeping current stopped without explanation.

[1](#)4. (C) Poloffs returned to speak with Gillon on January 12 to understand how the Belgian MFA were able to facilitate the freeing of the Belgians and to again request Belgian assistance with securing the release of American captives.

[1](#)5. (C) Gillon said that the Belgian MFA treated the detention of the three purely as a consular matter, avoiding any political dimensions. Although the families initially began to agitate publicly for the travelers' release, the government successfully urged them to remain quiet, and

Gillon said their private efforts had been counterproductive.

The MFA also secured the cooperation of the media to keep the matter discreet. The Belgian MFA also did not involve any EU partners, or try to link the case of its three citizens in with those of other EU citizens who are being held in Iran. Those cases involve persons who attended demonstrations and any link would be counterproductive, Gillon said.

¶6. (C) Gillon said that the Belgian Embassy in Teheran engaged a prominent Iranian lawyer to represent the three Belgians. He said that the lawyer was a university professor who had taught "all the judges in Teheran." Gillon said that this lawyer was very helpful.

¶7. (C) Gillon said that initially the Belgian MFA approached the Iranian Embassy in Brussels, but it soon became clear that no progress was being made. He said that the Belgian Ambassador in Teheran then became the focal point for all negotiations. The Ambassador limited his interactions with the government to two contacts, the Social Affairs Department of the Iranian MFA and the Director of the MFA's office of European Affairs, Ali Ahani, who is also a vice minister. Limiting contacts to the two MFA officials avoided the case getting "lost in the system," Gillon said. He also said that the fact that Ahani had recently been Ambassador to Belgium was helpful. The Belgian Embassy was only permitted two consular visits to the detainees and embassy personnel were unable to see the charges brought against the travelers. However, the Iranian lawyer was able to force the GOI to open the court file. He found that the file was virtually empty.

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¶8. (C) Gillon said that the process still took time and the GOB never received any idea about why or how the judges decided to release the Belgians. They remained in the Belgian embassy for about a month before being returned to Brussels on January 5.

¶9. (C) Gillon said that he did not have any information on the US citizens being detained in Iran. He said that the Belgian travelers were kept in isolation and were not even able to see one another. Gillon said that Embassy Brussels Officers are free to reach out to the former captives. He also offered contact with MFA Consular Department official Jean Gautier, who was closely involved in the case from Brussels. Belgian intelligence services were not involved in the effort to free the travelers. Gillon said that he was sure that the Belgian Embassy in Teheran would have passed on all pertinent information to the U.S. interest section in the Swiss Embassy in Teheran and given it advice on how to proceed in the U.S. cases.

¶10. (C) According to Gillon, there was no quid pro quo for the release, political or otherwise. He said he thought keeping the matter low profile helped deter any such demand. Although the remains of an Iranian prisoner who was killed in a prison riot in Leuven were returned to in October 2009, he did not feel that this was a direct factor. However, he said that because the Belgians had treated this Iranian consular case well, it was incumbent on Iran to reciprocate.

¶11. (C) Gillon said that the Belgian MFA now recommends that Belgian citizens do not travel to Iran unless absolutely necessary.

¶12. (C) Gillon mentioned that Iran (including the cases of "unjustly detained foreigners") will be on the agenda for the upcoming EU Foreign Affairs Committee on January 25.

GUTMAN

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